



Good, better, best

The use of rubrics for graded assessment

SHERRIDAN MAXWELL REPORTS ON HER RESEARCH INTO THE WAYS TEACHERS CAN USE RUBRICS AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL THAT IS VALID AND OBJECTIVE, AND IN WAYS THAT ARE REPRODUCIBLE.

Why is it that we assess the way we do? Searching through the assessments within the institute where I work, I found that many teachers working in competency-based programs fill them with hurdles, such as tests and exams and grading. Would someone with a 50 per cent pass grade be deemed as competent? In particular, how can we best offer graded assessment in a competency-based system for vocational education and training (VET) students?

As an educational designer working in the Australian VET sector, I've seen how industry training packages can be used to meet the needs of the workplace by focusing on the assessment of competency against standards determined by industry.

Typically, assessment methods and tools in the VET sector are explicitly aligned to these industry standards, rather than to criteria derived from learning objectives and activities. Put simply, industry training packages specify particular standards so that educators can assess whether a student is competent, or not. The problem, though, is that they don't enable teachers to teach,

or learners to learn, with a view to enhancement of competency beyond what is essentially a minimum standard.

My interest in rubrics, including their use to support graded assessment in competency-based programs, came about in part because of the needs in my own dual-sector institution, where VET students can gain credit in degrees through articulation agreements which specify standards of assessment to be reached. To meet the higher education requirements for a specified grade, without compromising the authenticity of the VET competency-based assessment, there's a need for dual-purpose assessment methods and tools.

We've moved to an environment in VET based on industry standards, but at the same time there are demands from higher education and students for a grade other than competent, and requests from some enterprises for statements of outcomes differentiating levels of competency. Clearly, there's a need for assessment tools which can help teachers to gain a better understanding of how to conduct competency-

based assessment in a complex environment.

So what's a rubric? In educational practice, it's a 'scoring tool' used in performance-based assessment. Typically, a rubric comprises a matrix which specifies learning outcomes as a continuum on a horizontal axis, with the criteria for evaluating learning outcomes at different levels of performance on a vertical axis. A rubric can typically be employed when a judgement is to be made to evaluate a broad range of activities, so that the judgement is more objective than subjective.

A rubric differs from a checklist in that it provides a clear description at each of the levels of performance expected in the learning criteria. It shows the quality of the performance rather than just a tick that the criteria have been achieved. This feature of rubrics makes them particularly useful in supporting assessment approaches where multiple criteria and elements of performance are being judged holistically; for example, in the Australian VET context, where individual units of competency

are clustered together for the purposes of assessment.

Assessment activity is often a postscript in teaching and learning experience rather than a developmental opportunity, but really assessment and its design should be pivotal to the learning experience; they should support the application of knowledge, be a place for critical self-reflection, and be an opportunity to provide feedback to both teacher and learner.

The attributes and skills being developed in competency-based learning are best supported if judgements of competent performance are soundly backed by an evidence-based approach. By providing a reasoned basis for making a judgment by reference to a set of externally determined measures,

that is, the criteria for assessment set out in a rubric, teachers can structure learning outcomes to define and describe levels of performance. The rubric offers the teacher and student a place of reflection and provides a rationale for the judgement made which is missing from the bald statement of 'competent' or 'not yet competent.' In this way, rubrics support formative assessment.

It's in the various arguments for graded assessment – including what students want, what employers ask for, and what higher education demands of articulating students – that the rubric comes into its own, since it can support the assessment of the 'difficult to assess performances.' This is because it spells out the boundaries of the learning experience: the expectations, the complexi-

ties, the scope to grade the application of skills, and the knowledge gained within the learning experience.'

Following work commissioned by the Western Australian Department of Training and undertaken by David Rumsey and Associates in 2002, what is now known as the 'Western Australian Model' has been an influential contributor to the Australian debate on graded assessment in competency-based programs. The main principle underpinning this model is that competency must be assessed first, with grading applied to the achievement of additional standards based on the key competencies developed by the Mayer Committee – a committee of the Australian Education Council chaired by Eric Mayer in the early 1990s.

Shade and Play Areas

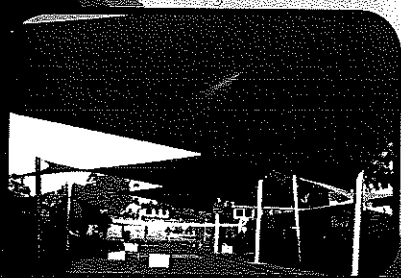
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Those seven key competencies are:

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- I using mathematical ideas and techniques
- I solving problems, and
- I using technology.

Since the Western Australian model was developed in 2001, the employability skills originating from the Mayer key competencies have been embedded in training packages.

Shelley Gillis and Patrick Griffin, in 'Principles underpinning graded assessment in VET: A critique of prevailing perceptions,' in 2005 looked at a number of grading models, including the Western Australian model. They concluded that the criteria and descriptor statements contained in this model are constant across industry and across competencies, but you still need clear criteria in order to reduce ambiguity and variability as a result of varying interpretations by individual teachers.

According to John Mitchell, Clive Chappell, Andrea Bateman and Susan Roy, in their discussion paper on critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in VET, there is still a poor understanding of assessment principles. Teachers, say Mitchell, Chappell, Bateman and Roy, need initial and ongoing professional development in graded assessment techniques and methods.

Assessors, they say, need to:

- I develop their reflective and analytical skills in reviewing their practice
- I conduct a participatory process involving assessor and candidate, where the student is integrally involved in designing an effective means of providing the required evidence
- I give clear understanding of the standards and what is required
- I develop the capacity to articulate these standards and evidence requirements in well-documented assessment tools
- I involve candidates in decision-making and feedback on assessment processes, and

- I involve students in the process of deciding what methods of assessment are used.

As Mitchell and co add, students want fair and consistent judgments from teachers, and they want a clear indication of what they need to do to be successful. They need clarity in their assessment tasks and want clear, unambiguous instructions, opportunities to discuss problems or issues with peers or teachers, and timely feedback.

Rubrics provide a framework for supporting students and teachers in competency-based training and assessment, but they also have the capacity to support a graded assessment process. The value is not in the rubric alone, however, but in how it is used in the process of assessment. This will underpin individual teaching styles and methods and clearly convey intentions and expectations to students, as well as providing a place for feedback and peer review.

The use of rubrics can be of benefit in a number of ways.

- I Rubrics can aid in the clarity of assessment expectations, since they spell out clearly the criteria and scale of the assessment task that is being asked of a student.
- I Rubrics offer a place for student reflection and aspiration, because a student can clearly see the assessment expectations of the task set and so can use the rubric as a guide to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in particular criteria, and to reflect on what they may need to do to change assessment outcomes. Students can also use the rubric to determine the scale or grade they wish to achieve.
- I Rubrics can be a place for student feedback, as it clearly spells out the assessment expectations. This makes the rubric into a communication tool because it can be used both before and after an assessment task.
- I Rubrics make assessment fair, transparent, reliable and sufficient. Having all the expectations and standards clearly articulated in a rubric avoids bias or subjectivity and poor communication, making the assessment more amenable to moderation.

- I Rubrics offer transparency for purposes of articulation. By ensuring criteria and scales are well set out, the learning and teaching levels achieved by students moving from competency-based assessments to higher education programs are clearly and confidently assessable.

- I Rubrics can be used as part of the recognition of prior learning assessment process since recognition of prior learning should be no more than the assessment a student would normally undertake to demonstrate competency.¹

It's clear that there are many models of graded assessment, and that currently graded assessment takes place in an ad hoc fashion. For assessment to be valid and consistent, however, a number of recommendations have emerged from this research, including that:

- I there be a wider use of rubrics as an assessment tool in competency-based programs, in particular, for assessments where grading will take place
- I the Western Australian model be considered for graded assessment in competency-based programs, including the steps of 'assessing as competent in the task/s' and 'knowledge first' – these to be followed by additional criteria that are clearly stated, as for grading
- I professional development programs be developed to support the understanding and building of rubrics, as well as the principles embedded in the Western Australian graded assessment model so that teachers clearly understand where and how rubrics can be applied in assessment tasks
- I the principles of graded assessment be embedded in competency-based assessment and the construction of rubrics be embedded into Certificate IV in Training and Assessing programs to enable consistency across registered training organisations and states
- I institutes have comprehensive policy and procedural guidelines to explain graded assessment practices in competency-based programs, and

I rubrics designed to support graded assessments be validated as per the Australian Quality Training Framework standards. **T**

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National Centre for Vocational Education Research Community of Practice scholarship that aims to build researcher capacity in the VET sector.

LINKS

To read the full version, visit www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2236.html

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What do teachers say?

SHERRIDAN MAXWELL USED AN ACTION-RESEARCH MODEL SO THAT THOSE INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS COULD DEVELOP NEW PRACTICE-RELATED KNOWLEDGE AND MOVE INTO NEW DIRECTIONS OF WORKING, THROUGH THE ACTION-RESEARCH CYCLES OF OBSERVING, REFLECTING, ACTING, EVALUATING AND MODIFYING. SHE WORKED WITH TEACHERS IN THE DIPLOMA OF VET PRACTICE PROGRAM. HERE'S HOW TWO DESCRIBED THE EXPERIENCE OF DESIGNING AND USING RUBRICS AS PART OF THEIR SUITE OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS.

Teacher 1

As a teacher, I've been able to teach rather than 'wing it.' I now have a concrete tool to assess from. It has been good to show how it's possible to make a tool that is reproducible, that is valid and not subjective, a tool that ensures uniformity across assessors. It's fairer and more objective.

The rubric informs assessment expectations; it enables the students to meet the bar and excel if they want to. Some teachers don't like to show the bar – that is, teaching the way we were taught – and may not understand assessment; they are just 'marking.' The rubric is a better way to assess; rather than just mark. (The student) is looking at the performance descriptor (rather) than the score.

Building a rubric was not all that difficult to do; the biggest obstacle is those (teachers) who don't use them and go back to old

models (of assessment), not understanding the rationale behind rubrics.

Teacher 2

The concept of using a rubric provided me with a resource and provided the students with a clearer guide to their learning experience, rather than the subject being created in the moment and going off track and leaving the training package intent. Before using a rubric, I had an assignment and students going off track; I tried to make improvements and was ignored. The first rubric I developed allowed for feedback and reflection of where the students were. It shifted the goal posts and gave the students a clear indication of where they were going. For the students, there was a shift to being competent.

The initiation into rubrics has been restitution, an after-the-fact/just-in-time

device that has allowed me to get back on track, and the students ended up producing a plan (the assessment task) that satisfied the requirements of the training package. The rubric very quickly and clearly showed the students where they were, currently, in the development of their project, and where they needed to get to. The rubric shifted the students' thinking, so it was a powerful tool, a brilliant support for teachers and the students, in black and white; we all know what is required.

I had used a wiki for communication and guidance throughout the project and found that it was largely ignored; however, the rubric in this instance was a stronger tool. I was able to describe the reflective and cooperative elements to be developed in the project. The rubric was able to show the requirements that each student needed as evidence of their input and engagement. **T**